



**Manchester  
Metropolitan  
University**

---

Fraser, Sandy, Flewitt, Rosie ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1986-0644> and Hammersley, Martin (2013) What is research with children and young people? In: Understanding Research with Children and Young People. Sage. ISBN 9781446274934

---

**Downloaded from:** <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/624231/>

**Version:** Accepted Version

**Publisher:** Sage

Please cite the published version

<https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk>

Fraser, S., Flewitt, R.S. and Hamersley, M. (2013). '[What is research with children and young people?](#)' In A. Clark, R.S. Flewitt, M. Hammersley and M. Robb (eds). *Understanding research with children and young people*, pp34-50. London: Sage.

## **Chapter 2**

### **WHAT IS RESEARCH WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE?**

***SANDY FRASER, ROSIE FLEWITT and MARTYN HAMMERSLEY***

Research with children and young people has a long history, going back at least to the end of the nineteenth century (de Landsheere 1988). However, its character has changed over time, and become more diverse. This reflects the range of different areas and disciplines involved, such as the study of health and education, of psychology, anthropology, and sociology. In this chapter we will look, first of all, at the nature of psychological and social research. The aim will be to give you an initial sense of the different approaches to research that you will find in the literature about children and young people, the ideas underpinning them, and the debates that surround them. You will be introduced to these in more detail in later chapters. In the second half of the chapter we will look at what it means to do research *with* children and young people. In particular, since it has become very influential, we will pay close attention to what is referred to as participatory research. As will become clear, this highlights some important methodological, ethical and political issues.

#### **1. What is psychological and social research?**

Our starting point is the idea of scientific inquiry, and how this was initially interpreted in psychological and social research. At the end of the nineteenth century, and for a large part of the twentieth century, research concerned with children and young people was strongly influenced by the model of research offered by the physical and biological

sciences. In order for an investigation to be treated as scientific research – and therefore distinguished from journalism, from the everyday kinds of ‘research’ that we all might do in getting the information we need, or even from the sorts of account to be found in philosophy and the humanities – it had to be able to demonstrate that it had approximated to the rigorous methods of science. This involved seeing it as having a number of distinctive features: it consisted of the *systematic* pursuit of knowledge, treated as of value in itself; a *sceptical* questioning of commonsense ideas; an *ethical* stance which shows regard for the interests of participants and the consequences of research; and, above all, a concern with *empirical investigation*.

### *Empirical investigation*

The word ‘empirical’ here means that primary reliance is placed upon setting out to find out about things through observation, and/or through collecting testimony from witnesses – rather than by relying upon existing commonsense knowledge, religious belief, or what is written in ancient books. In other words, science requires active investigation of the world: searching for whatever relevant data already exists, or producing new data through observation, experiment, or some other means. What is referred to as the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century is often seen as having first introduced this empirical approach – it was argued that only this can give us reliable knowledge, or at least knowledge that we *know* to be reliable (Shapin 1998; Principe 2011). And, in the wake of this revolution in the natural sciences, there were attempts to apply a scientific approach to understanding the political, economic, and social lives of human beings.

Some early research on children, especially in the nineteenth century, relied upon detailed observation of their development, for example with the idea of documenting the various stages through which babies and young children pass on the way to becoming adults; and, of course, there was also some interest in the pathologies characteristic of childhood, and how these could be treated. For example (?), there was a high death rate amongst children at that time even in the West, and there was considerable interest in the reasons for this, and more generally in childhood illnesses and infirmities. Often, this

formed part of broader investigations into the poverty to be found in the new towns and cities of the industrial age.

### *Other features of the natural sciences model*

Because physics was widely regarded as the science in which the most remarkable progress had been made, people's ideas about the nature of rigorous empirical research were strongly shaped by the experimental approach characteristic of that discipline. This was seen as involving two key features:

1. The manipulation of variables to gauge their effects on outcomes of interest (for example, children's health or learning);
2. The attempt to measure these variables accurately, using tests and scales – thereby opening the way for quantitative analysis of the data.

Experiments in physics involved trying to isolate the processes of interest from interference by extraneous influences, and then altering what was seen as the causal variable (for example temperature) in order to document how this affected the outcome variable (for instance, weight or mass). Scales were developed to measure key physical variables, as were techniques for carrying out measurements: the history of thermometers is a good illustration (Knowles Middleton 1966).

There were attempts to render the process of psychological and social measurement analogous to physical measurement, in the sense of treating people and their relations with one another as objects existing in the world, whose stable characteristics could be captured and analysed reliably. But, of course, the specific methods used in physics could not be applied when studying human beings. In psychology, for example, scales and tests had to be developed to measure individual characteristics. Thus, intelligence tests were developed and these were subsequently used for allocating children to different schools, and to different classes within a school.

However, these techniques were necessarily very different from those employed in measuring the properties of physical phenomena.

Experiments in psychology also inevitably had to be carried out in a rather different way from those in physics, for example subjects had to be given instructions about what they were to do, their responses were often verbal, and their behaviour could not be controlled to the same extent as physical processes. Moreover, in social research it was frequently not possible to manipulate variables experimentally. Instead, there were attempts to employ comparative analysis as a means of ‘controlling variables’ in order to discover what caused what: by looking at cases where the variable suspected of being the cause was high by comparison with those cases in which it was low, and where other variables that might affect the outcome were at the same level. As this indicates, despite variation in the particular techniques employed, much was inherited in terms of methodological ideas from physical science, not least the assumption that human behaviour must be conceived as subject to stable, causal laws.

#### *Reliance on explicit procedures*

Another key feature of the notion of scientific research, as it was widely understood in the first half of the twentieth century, and continues to be interpreted today in some quarters, was the requirement that empirical investigations should be carried out in ways that are made explicit, so that other people can understand exactly what was done and evaluate the likely validity of the findings on this basis. Replication (in other words, repeating an experiment to see whether the same outcome occurs) was often seen as the main means of checking the validity of findings, and came to be regarded by many as an essential feature of science. Another form of replication was also applied to the techniques used in research, for example psychological tests: these were assessed in terms of how far they provided consistent results when applied by different people or in different contexts. This idea of using explicit procedures developed only slowly in natural science (Shapin 1995), but in the twentieth century it came to be seen by many as characteristic of a scientific approach to psychology and social science.

This concern with making research explicit or transparent is closely related to another important idea. This is the belief that it is necessary for researchers to follow a predetermined set of procedures in order to minimize the danger that their own distinctive individual features (preconceptions, preferences, beliefs, etc) will shape what they do and therefore distort the data and findings they produce. In other words, it came to be seen as important to minimise any effects that the researcher might have on the data and findings.

This is one reason why in carrying out social surveys (whether face-to-face or online), the exact ordering and wording of the questions is laid out, in much the same format as in a self-administered questionnaire. And in this model of research, interviewers were, and sometimes still are, required to follow the instructions to the letter: only using the words specified and predefined probe questions when interviewees fail to respond to initial questions. In effect, the aim was to mechanise the data collection process, eliminating the effects of the particular characteristics of the people involved in order to discover causal processes that were assumed to be universal or general. In addition, the aim was to ensure that the data produced by multiple interviewers, and coming from many respondents, would be comparable and open to quantitative analysis designed to detect causal relationships. While it was widely recognized that the process of data collection could not be completely mechanized, the argument was that approximation to this model would minimise potential error.

### *Objectivity, subjectivity and the study of human beings*

A concept closely associated with this approach is ‘objectivity’: through proceduralising the research process it was believed that ‘subjective’ factors could be eliminated or minimized. What is meant by the word ‘subjective’ here is complex. The term has at least two important meanings:

- One relates to what is individual or idiosyncratic rather than general. It was believed that scientific research is concerned with discovering general patterns, in other words scientific laws; though it should be noted that some psychological

research was specifically concerned with measuring individual differences, albeit with a view to discovering their laws of variation.

- The other important meaning of ‘subjective’ in this context is ‘internal’. In physics and chemistry the focus is on objects external to the investigator, with a view to understanding the laws that govern these. So the task was to find a means of getting beyond individual opinion based on particular experience and point of view, and, as already noted, the means proposed for doing this was to use methods that anyone can employ, so that conclusions can be checked through replication. However, there is clearly a problem when it comes to studying people, since here subjectivity is part of what is being investigated: people are aware of their surroundings, adapt to these in various ways, build up attitudes and habits, reflect on themselves and their world(s) differently, and all of these ‘internal’ features and processes affect their behaviour. Within psychology, divergent approaches were initially adopted in seeking to apply scientific methods to the study of human beings. The most influential tendency in the first half of the twentieth century was behaviourism. As its name implies, this sought to restrict psychological investigation to the observation of external behaviour, and aimed at explaining variations in this through showing links to external stimuli of various kinds. This approach was first applied to animals, seeking to understand the processes of learning through which their behaviour developed, but it was soon also applied to human learning as well. However, it soon came to be realized that we cannot study people’s behaviour without ascribing perceptions and beliefs, intentions and motives, to them; and that we need to take account of these things in explaining their behaviour.

In other fields, besides psychology, the notion of scientific inquiry was modified in important ways, though retained a commitment to objectivity in some form. For example, in anthropology the scientific model led to an insistence that in order to understand ‘primitive’ societies, instead of relying upon the second-hand reports of travelers and missionaries, as nineteenth-century anthropologists had generally done, it

was necessary actually to go to these societies and engage in direct observation and careful description. Furthermore, it came to be emphasized that objectivity required that the anthropologist suspend her or his own prior cultural assumptions and prejudices in order to be able to grasp 'the native point of view' (Malinowski 1922).

### *Challenges to the natural sciences model*

So, what was taken to be the model of scientific inquiry, derived from the physical sciences, was modified in various ways when applied in the human sciences. Moreover, increasingly over the course of the twentieth century questions came to be raised in a challenging way about the scientific model and how it had been interpreted in psychology and the social sciences. It was also pointed out that the results of many studies were often of doubtful validity, and/or were in conflict with one another. It began to be argued by many that the distinctive nature of human beings and their lives required a radically different approach. For example, anthropologists came increasingly to emphasise the difficulties faced in understanding other cultures, that a process of intercultural communication is required which cannot be reduced to following explicit procedures. And cultural diversity also raised fundamental questions about whether there are universal or general scientific laws that apply across all human societies (see, for instance, Geertz 1973; Clifford and Marcus 1992).

In addition, the prestige of natural science declined somewhat from the middle of the twentieth century and there was growing scepticism about some of its findings. In physics, with the rise of relativity theory and quantum theory, the knowledge produced about physical reality no longer matched our common, everyday experience of the behaviour of physical objects, leading to questions about the reality of the phenomena studied by physicists or at least the relevance of their accounts to the world we experience. There was also increasing concern about the consequences of applying science through technology: in light of the devastation caused by modern warfare techniques, the pollution generated by industry, and so on (Hesse 1972:275).



This shift in the status of science encouraged psychologists and social scientists to explore a wider range of approaches to understanding human behaviour and social institutions, often ones which no longer involved any demand for experimental manipulation and control, or any constraint on investigating 'subjective' phenomena such as people's experiences and beliefs. Indeed, it came to be insisted that individuals' behaviour cannot be properly understood simply as responses to external stimuli. Instead, a focus was placed on interpreting the interactional processes through which people make sense of themselves, their actions and their surroundings. Many researchers insisted that this sort of understanding requires a much more flexible and sensitive approach than that modeled on physics, one that draws upon researchers' human capacity for communication and learning, and their experience of socio-cultural worlds.

Frequently, these new approaches to empirical research involved the use of qualitative data; in other words, open-ended descriptions of patterns of action, and exploration of the accounts that people offer about their lives and circumstances. Moreover, these were collected in 'naturalistic' situations, rather than ones largely controlled by the researcher, with the idea that this would allow the understanding of people's actions, attitudes, beliefs, etc in a way that the older, scientific approach did not. So, observation was carried out in the everyday situations in which people live their lives or carry out their work. And, increasingly, interviews tended to be open-ended and conversational in character, designed to explore people's experiences, perspectives and beliefs.

Often it was argued that this new approach represented a more appropriate conception of scientific method, and some qualitative researchers even rejected the very idea of psychological or social *science*. At the same time, most social scientists retained a belief in the importance of empirical investigation as the main source of reliable knowledge.

As noted earlier, the changing public status of science was not just a matter of increasing scepticism towards its findings, equally important were ethical and political concerns about the consequences of scientific knowledge. And, in the case of

psychological and social research, the concern was not just about the *consequences* of knowledge but also about *the research process itself*. It had long been recognized that research could harm people or infringe their rights, and that precautions need to be taken to minimize this. However, research ethics came to be interpreted by many researchers, not least in the field of Childhood Studies, as playing a more central role in the research process than previously.

A related issue that came to be given attention was whether research should be carried out ‘on’ children and young people, or whether it should instead be carried out ‘with’ or ‘by’ them. Treating people as ‘objects’ to be studied seemed to many to be unethical. As part of this, the concept of objectivity often came to be rejected, or at least redefined in ways that were felt to be more appropriate in the human sciences. For example, some emphasized the importance of ‘reflexivity’: of researchers trying to remain aware of how they are shaping, or have shaped, the data and findings, and making this explicit in research reports. A few moved beyond this, to the idea that research inevitably reflects the individuality of the researcher and the contingent character of the research process.

Another aspect of what we have been calling the scientific model also came to be challenged. Previously it had often been assumed that the production of knowledge is worthwhile in itself, and that whether or not it is subsequently ‘applied’ in practice, how, and with what consequences, was not the responsibility of the researcher. But there came to be increasing insistence that, to be of value, research must contribute to improving policy or practice: for example by making the lives of children and young people better. Some saw this as being achieved through research showing which health treatments, social work interventions, or educational strategies are effective and which are not. But many emphasised the role of research in challenging policy or practice, for instance through amplifying the voices of children and young people, and/or through offering critiques of the assumptions on which it is based.

Also involved here, sometimes, was a concern about the role that science had come to play in modern culture: as claiming to offer the only true account of the world, as

providing techniques for manipulating the behaviour of populations, and so on. This was viewed by some as a form of domination and as an infringement of people's autonomy. And these political and ethical ideas also came to be applied to the process of research itself. Important here were ethical and political ideas about the rights of participants in research, especially of children and young people. Equally important, questions were raised about the quality of data likely to be produced in research relationships where researchers are in control: deciding what to investigate and how to do this, how to analyse the data, and how to disseminate the findings. It was argued that such research would be biased by adult perspectives, and therefore fail to grasp the experience of children and young people.

One consequence of these developments were increasing arguments in favour of participatory models of research, in which children and young people were directly involved in decisions being made, to varying degrees and in various ways. This is directly relevant to the second issue that we want to address in this chapter: what it means to do research *with* children and young people.

## **2. Empirical research *with* children and young people**

The second aspect which we cover in this chapter concerns the use of the phrase 'research *with* children and young people'. What exactly does 'with' mean in this context? One long-held view of social and psychological researchers has been that young children are not competent to describe or understand their own world. On occasions, children have been valued and understood only in terms of being 'a work in progress' towards adulthood, concerning what they might become and not who they presently are:

'children [are] often denied the right to speak for themselves either because they are held incompetent in making judgements or because they are thought of as unreliable witnesses about their own lives' (Qvortrup et al., 1994: 2).

Such an approach undermines the status of children in society, and sheds doubt on how relevant research findings can be if they fail to take into account the perspectives of the people whose lives and experiences they are investigating. Margaret Donaldson (1978) and others criticised the highly influential work of Piaget (1896–1980) as being defective because it failed to take sufficient account of the experimental nature of his observations of young children's behaviour and competences. Donaldson's work showed how, under different conditions, children were capable of the kinds of logical reasoning that Piaget had asserted occurred at a much later stage in their development. Consequently Woodhead and Faulkner argued that Donaldson's studies 'helped developmental psychologists recognise that children's true competencies are revealed *only in situations which make sense to them*' (Woodhead and Faulkner, 2008: 26, emphasis added). If children and young people are competent in a way that has previously been ignored, and yet they are not listened to, then the evidence-based development of our education and social policies risks being misguided. Indeed, some researchers argue that any theoretical framework that concerns the lives of children and young people, but which does not reflect the viewpoints of children and young people's life experiences, may be of only partial or no relevance to their lives as they perceive them.

Much of the recent literature on research with children and young people argues against treating children as 'objects', and argues for viewing them as participants, as young citizens with rights that must be respected. This implies an approach to conducting research, rather than a specific method.

Research 'with' children involves a range of approaches towards research and towards children. At one end of this spectrum, children might be encouraged and supported to carry out research for themselves, with minimal adult involvement, or, at the other end of the spectrum, adults might carry out research in which the involvement of children is restricted to their providing interview or documentary data. The latter is common where the focus is on issues such as: the impact of different local authorities' implementation of housing benefit on children's lives; comparing different systems of financial accounting of school budgets; studying management structures of social

services teams that make assessments of need. The key is that the research helps to inform about children's lives. Many research studies with children fall between these two extremes, but are united by a common thread that children and young people are recognised as the experts in their own lives, and a variety of methods can be used to find out more about their lives. Sometimes, this might mean the adult acts as primary researcher and sometimes children might be more actively involved in participatory research.

To illustrate empirical research with children and young people as active participants in the research process, we have selected two examples which give an idea of a spectrum of involvement, where children and young people were involved to a greater or lesser extent in research. The first example gives a brief account of the Mosaic approach in London, and shows how researchers enabled children to play an active part in revealing their 'worlds' but where the research agenda was set by the researcher. The second example introduces an action research project, where young people in Bangalore became actively involved in a research-based process of change, influencing how the study was designed and its outcomes.

### *The Mosaic approach*

The Mosaic approach was developed by Alison Clark and Peter Moss (for example Clark and Moss, 2001; Clark and Moss, 2005) (also see Chapter 12). This research is one of a growing number of studies to actively engage with young children as 'experts in their own lives' (1994) in order to gain new understandings about how young children connect to their environment:

Surveys and audits, questionnaires and interviews are all excellent techniques to record information, but sometimes they are not appropriate to explore the subtle and hidden feelings that connect us with a place. They do not reveal the experiences and memories of childhood and

youth that contribute to creating a sense of place. (Adams and Ingham, 1998: 149)

The Mosaic approach uses a range of participatory visual methods alongside observation and interviewing to build up new understandings of young children's views and experiences of early childhood environments. Children under five are invited to take a researcher on 'tours' of their nursery, taking photographs and providing a 'running commentary' on their routine activities, who they typically meet and where they meet them, which rooms they have access to or not, and so on. The children are placed in charge of the tour and how it is recorded: by photograph, audio recording or drawings. The results of combining the results from this and the other research tools in the Mosaic approach can lead to a process of discovery at an individual, institutional and professional level.

There can be tangible and immediate benefits for individual children involved, in terms of understandings gained about children's interests and concerns within a particular space. At an institutional level the first study using this approach discovered the importance of the children's private spaces within the nursery as well as the need to involve the children in planning the use of external play areas. In a subsequent study that focused on the design and review of learning environments (Clark 2010) the Mosaic approach revealed data that challenged professional assumptions about young children's capabilities and perceptions. One example arose over the understanding that primary colours were appropriate for a nursery and related to young children's limited awareness of subtleties of tone. Children's comments about the differences in tone between the colour of a piece of furniture shown in a photograph they had taken and the actual object challenged this assumption which had long been held by architects.

This example illustrates how engaging with the perspectives of research participants can enrich the findings of empirical research. Such engagement may require that 'older' methods of data collection have to be adapted to become more inclusive of children and young people (Bryant, 1985), to ensure that throughout the research process,

engagement between researchers, participants and stakeholders is a crucial part of the investigation.

### *Participatory research by children in Bangalore*

The second example we have chosen illustrates how research with children and young people can challenge expectations and be a tool for change, making different perspectives visible that run counter to the dominant power structures. The focus here was young people's perspectives on poverty and urban living. The majority of children and young people in the world grow up in circumstances and expectations that are quite different from those in minority-world countries. They live in contexts where there are less stable economic, legal and political institutions, children and young people can find themselves caught between the influence of affluent western society and the uncertainty of living in poverty.

In some countries, such as India, where the second example is set, the gradient between wealth and poverty can be very steep. Throughout the last decade, India's economy has grown rapidly, and a sustained and steady rate of growth has contributed to a reduction in poverty. According to the World Bank, the rate of poverty in India has fallen from 41.6% of the population in 2005 to 32.7% in 2010, with a definition of poverty based on a daily income of \$1.25. By this measure, nearly a third of India's population are poverty-stricken. (World Bank, 2012). Of course, poverty is multi-dimensional. However important income is to poverty, other facets lead to a lower quality of life that we call poverty, and children and young people at the sharp end of poverty are relatively powerless to challenge their conditions of life. When governments, charities and other international agencies seek to deal with such issues, the voice of children and young people is often left unheard. A research study which sought to redress the balance in this respect is the *Growing Up in Cities* (GUIC) project sponsored by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). GUIC research included many different projects throughout the world, one of which was in Bangalore in India.

In *The Growing Up in Cities Project: Global Perspectives on Children and Youth as Catalysts for Community Change*, Louise Chawla and David Driskell (2006) outline children's lives in Sathyanagar or 'Truth Town', a suburb of Bangalore.

"Like many urban settlements in India and throughout the developing world, Sathyanagar is a place that outsiders—including many middle-class Indians—would describe as dirty, squalid, poverty-stricken and depressed. It is, both in the classification scheme of the state bureaucracy and in the local nomenclature of its residents, a slum." (Chawla and Driskell, 2006, p186-187)

The methodology used to research children and young people's lives in this study was Participatory Action Research (PAR) in which the children themselves became the primary researchers and producers of research, rather than being 'researched upon'.

What emerged from analysis of the data was that despite the governmental and local designation of Sathyanagar as a 'slum', and despite the reality of living in a 'poor and environmentally degraded place', Sathyanagar was seen by these children and young people as being "culturally and emotionally rich, [allowing] happy lives, in a community that possessed a number of advantages: some apparent, and some perhaps invisible to the eyes of its adults." (Chawla and Driskell, 2006,p187). This result was surprising and interesting, and the authors noted that:

"During the several month process of conducting the participatory research activities, not a single child in Sathyanagar was heard to utter the phrase "I'm bored." Indeed, the issue of "idleness," often associated with underemployment and typically identified as a source of youth dissatisfaction and crime in many slums and low income communities, was nonexistent for these young people." (Ibid, p190)

The *Growing Up in Cities* project existed in order to do two things. First, it allowed the views of children and young people to be fed into local planning processes, local authorities and/or non-governmental agencies, giving voices to problems and



solutions identified by children and young people. Secondly, such research sought to highlight obstacles to the proposed changes and to community development. While the children of Sathyanagar were imbued with resilience and a positive attitude, they were also clear about what Truth Town needed. Their concerns alighted on improvements to public sanitation and water supply. The data also highlighted what the children saw as obstacles to this improvement:

“While the stories shared by young people in Sathyanagar were infused with a grounded optimism about the future, their stories also told of first-hand experience with official neglect, broken promises, wasted resources and squandered opportunities, casting an unflattering light not only on inefficient, ineffective and sometimes inept or corrupt bureaucracies and politicians, but also on misguided development agencies and mismanaged non governmental groups.” (Ibid, p192)

The authors go on to explain how this PAR project became reshaped over time to meet the agendas of sponsoring agencies, both governmental and non-governmental. What needed to change was not only that the viewpoints of children and young people needed to be included in the research process, but also that “the way in which local decision makers understood and prioritised local issues” needed to be changed (Ibid):

“Perhaps most disheartening was the near complete lack of connection between what local officials viewed as the needs of local young people (more opportunities for sports and recreation) and what young people expressed as their needs (adequate clean water and sanitation).” (Ibid, p194)

Despite these obstacles there were some successes, the need for a Study Centre for the children of Sathyanagar was identified and met. Yet, at the heart of this example of research with children and young people, there are two messages. The first is that good empirical research which features young people taking a primary role in research is possible. The second is that it can be politically resisted and downplayed due to the interests of others, such as the finding that the grounded optimism of Sathyanagar’s youth struck an awkward chord with NGOs, whose *raison d’être* required projects with

definable and ‘achievable’ objectives. It might have been that provision of sports and recreation facilities were easier to accomplish and less politically and economically sensitive than provision of better public health infrastructure. Frequently, research with children and young people can be political in a wider sense.

From these two examples we can see how participatory research with children and young people can be carried out in different ways, with different roles taken on by the young researcher participants, and with different results that reflect the varying aims of the individual projects. What links both projects is that they each gave rise to findings which surprised adult researchers and members of established organizations who were responsible for planning aspects of the young people’s lives. They also both challenged long-held views about the perspectives and competences of the children and young people involved in the studies. At a deeper level, the Mosaic Approach acted as a thinking tool, providing a context in which children and adults could use not only words but also images and artefacts to construct and reflect on knowledge e.g. about a particular place. The *Living Spaces* study was an action research project which was not only about revealing power differences but about attempting to readdress some of these differences by exploring democratic forms of knowledge building (Reason and Bradbury, 2006). Both are examples of participatory research, which sets out to actively engage participants throughout the research process and to give status to the knowledge created.

#### *Notions of child ‘competence’ in research*

In the past it has been argued that young participants may lack the appropriate vocabulary and understanding to ‘make sense’ of research aims or of the research process. Yet this can also be true for adults. There is no necessary reason why an adult should have a more adept vocabulary for research than a child or young person. However, it is arguable that an adult will have a greater ‘stock of experience’ to draw upon which could provide relevant conceptions for empirical research. And it is equally possible that some children or young people will have had a more diverse stock of experiences and a greater facility with different languages than some adults.

Clark's research example of the Mosaic approach, for example, has also shown how symbolic tools other than language can be used to gain rich insights into young children's perspectives, such as asking children to take photographs and to make artefacts, and then to talk with them about the objects they have made. This exemplifies how the negotiation of meaning may unfold by using particular types of data collection methods that children engage with readily, such as drawings, photography, diaries, and other innovative techniques. Yet similar methods are not only effective with young participants - they can help to unlock the thoughts and perceptions of research participants of any age (see Reavey, 2011).

This implies something else: the way in which research can be negotiated with children and young people, or indeed participants of any age, will differ according to habits and mores which the child or young person has learned. Recognising this involves taking into account the power relationships to which the child or young person is already subject. For example, within the time pressures and hierarchical power structures of a school, teachers may not necessarily be familiar or in agreement with a researcher allowing children the time or space to be active co-researchers in their own class environment. As a result, there will be great diversity in negotiated research relationships – a quality also found in research with adults because, like 'adults', 'children and young people' are not a homogeneous mass, but are diverse in their competencies and their freedom. Therefore, negotiating the terms of a 'research space' can be a practically challenging procedure (see also Chapter 4 Bucknall).

Part of the practical difficulties may involve the political context; i.e. the network of power relationships that a child or young person is already part of before any research begins. This can be in terms of the pattern of peer relations, family relationships or institutional relationships, for example, being in school or in a residential care home. Moreover, the research may concern children and young people but it would be unusual if they were the only stakeholders involved. This may restrain a researcher's ambition to achieve equal partnership. It might be argued that children and young people can never be

the sole voice that is heard within any piece of research; other stakeholders should be represented in the research too.

Research with children and young people can therefore be seen as different from research with adults, not necessarily because of young people's ability or understanding, but as a consequence of their perceived roles in the community, society and culture within which they find themselves. Samantha Punch (2002) argues that there are clear differences between research with children and young people as compared to research with adults, and suggests: 'There has been a tendency to perceive research with children as one of two extremes: just the same or entirely different from adults.' Elsewhere she notes:

It is somewhat paradoxical that within the new sociology of childhood many of those who call for the use of innovative or adapted research techniques with children, are also those who emphasise the competence of children. If children are competent social actors, why are special 'child-friendly' methods needed to communicate with them? (Punch, 2002: 322 and 321)

So called 'child-friendly' methods are sometimes negotiated compromises that allow communication between the different conceptual outlooks of children and young people on the one hand, and those of researchers on the other. We propose that using the term 'child-friendly' to describe data collection techniques may wittingly or unwittingly undermine the principle that young people must be considered competent experts in their own lives. There is nothing inherently or essentially 'child-friendly' about such techniques; they are all contingent to the frames of cultural reference of researchers and participants. Such techniques are 'participant-friendly' rather than 'child-friendly'. Even if created to be appealing to children, the same research methods are often also found to be highly motivational for adult participation as well, such as those that involve the use or creation of artefacts (photographs, film etc) or embodied enactment as a basis for discussion or exploration of experience.

## Concluding remarks

In this chapter we have looked at two aspects of research with children and young people. We started by examining the notion of scientific *research*. Initially, psychological and social inquiry was modeled on work in the natural sciences. However, over time various parts of this scientific model came to be questioned, for example on the grounds that studying people's lives places quite different demands on the researcher from those faced by natural scientists. There were arguments here about what sorts of method are required if we are to produce sound knowledge about human beings, but also about the ethical and political aspects of psychological and social science. At the same time, for the most part the core idea was retained that research demands systematic, ethical and empirical investigation of the world in which many currently-taken-for-granted ideas are questioned, rather than reliance upon, say, commonsense or the pronouncements of political or religious authorities.

In the second half of the chapter we examined ideas about what is distinctive about carrying out research *with* children and young people, showing respect for their competence and knowledge. There is variation in the form that such 'participatory' research takes, ranging from studies aimed at documenting the perspectives of children and young people, at one end of the spectrum, to studies where children and young people are more fully involved in the research process, from the early stages of identifying relevant research questions, through carrying out data collection and analysis, to the dissemination of research findings. Although participatory research is by no means the only way to conduct empirical research into the lives of children and young people, we argue that it can lead to highly original insights and can improve the credibility of the knowledge produced.

## References

- Adams, E. and Ingham, S. (1998) *Changing places: Children's Participation in Environmental Planning*, London, Children's Society.
- Chawla, L. and Driskell, D. (2006) 'The Growing Up in Cities Project', *Journal of Community Practice*, 14:1-2, 183-200.
- Clark, A. and Moss, P. (2001) *Listening to Young Children: The Mosaic Approach*, London, National Children's Bureau, (2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2011)
- Clark, A. and Moss, P. (2005) *Spaces to Play: more listening to young children using the Mosaic approach*. London: National Children's Bureau.
- Clark, A. (2010) *Transforming Children's Spaces: Children's and Adults' participation in designing learning environments*, Abingdon, Routledge.
- Clifford, J. and Marcus, G. (eds) (1992) *Writing Culture: the politics and poetics of ethnography*. Berkeley CA: University of California Press.
- de Landsheere, G. (1988) 'History of educational research', in Keeves, J. (ed.) *Educational Research, Methodology and Measurement: an international handbook*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Donaldson, M. (1978) *Children's Minds*, London, Fontana.
- Geertz, C. (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York, Basic Books.
- Griesel, R.D., Swart-Kruger, Jill and Chawla, Louise (2002) 'Children in South Africa can make a difference: an Assessment of *Growing Up in Cities* in Johannesburg', *Childhood*, 9(1).
- Hammersley, M. (2011) 'Objectivity: a reconceptualisation', in Williams, M. and Vogt, P. (eds) *The Sage Handbook of Methodological Innovation*. London: Sage.
- Hammersley, M. (2012) *What is Qualitative Research?* London, Continuum/Bloomsbury.
- Hesse, M. (1972) 'In defence of objectivity', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 4<sup>th</sup> October.

- Knowles Middleton, W. (1966) *The History of the Thermometer and its Use in Meteorology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Lnagsted, O. (1994) 'Looking at quality from the child's perspective', in Moss, P. and pence, A. (eds.) *Valuing Quality in Early Childhood Services: new approaches to defining quality*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.
- Malinowski, B. (1922) *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: an account of native enterprise and adventure in the archipelagos of Melanesian New Guinea*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Principe, L. (2011) *The Scientific Revolution*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Punch, S. (2002) 'Research with children: the same or different from research with adults?' *Childhood*, 9(3): 321–341.
- Qvortrup, J., Bardy, M., Sgritta, G. and Wintersberger, H. (eds) (1994) *Childhood Matters*, Vienna, Europe Centre.
- Reason, P. and Bradbury, H. (eds.) (2006) *Handbook of Action Research*. London: Sage.
- Reavey, P. (2011) (eds) *Visual Methods in Psychology: Using and Interpreting Images in Qualitative Research* New York: Routledge.
- Shapin, S. (1995) *A Social History of Truth*. Second edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Shapin, S. (1998) *The Scientific Revolution*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Woodhead, M. and Faulkner, D. (2008) 'Subjects, objects or participants? Dilemmas of psychological research with children', in P. Christensen and A. James (eds), *Research with Children: Perspectives and Practices*, Second edition. London, Routledge Falmer, 10-39.
- World Bank, India (2012) Available at: <http://data.worldbank.org/country/india>. (Accessed March 2013).